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Crip Silences, Crip Futurities, Crip Joy

by Delores B. Phillips, Alyson Patsavas, Theodora Danylevich, Alyson K. Spurgas, Jess Whatcott and Angela Carter | Issue 14.2 (Fall 2025), Positions

ABSTRACT Delores Phillips and Cultural Studies Association's Crip Cultures/Critical Disability Studies Working Group Co-Host Theodora Danylevich discuss crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy with authors Alyson Patsavas (University of Illinois, Chicago), Alyson K. Spurgas (Trinity College), and Jess Whatcott (San Diego State University). This podcast is accompanied by a scholarly commentary by Angela Carter.

KEYWORDS crip, cripistemology, futurity, joy, silence

Positions Season 2, Episode 3

Positions
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Six Ways of Looking at Crip Silence[1]

By Angela M. Carter

As listeners might expect,Critical Disability Studies scholarsPatsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich do two useful things in Season 2, Episode 3 of *Positions*. First, they reflect on the authorial processes of "Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,"[2] as well as the cultural and political moment from which the special section emerged. Second, they expand the

theoretical and methodological interventions we made then—during "Trump 1.0"—to analyze what we're experiencing today. Of course, their discussion acknowledges that "what's happening now has always been happening." But the conversation isn't in search of a conclusion. They are doing a secret third thing.

Perhaps it's my flavor of neurodivergence or that I was raised up by women of color feminists, I don't know. Either way, as I was listening, I felt transported almost immediately to the crowded corners of conference hallways; to the late night conversations "cripping out" with other disabled folk with snacks and coloring books, with outheat pads and pain killers; and to the kitchen tables[3] of our elders and ancestors. To me, this episode epitomizes the power of collective knowledge production, which is so often how crip knowledge production works. Knowledge through collaboration.[4] Knowledge through conversation as theory and theorizing.

This is not new. Nor is it particularly crip. Communal and collective knowing has emerged from marginalized peoples across time and space. The naming of crises as chronic is also not new or something only knowable through disabled life. Many others have named the invocation of emergency as a politicized rhetoric, and as nothing exceptional.[5] What is particular here is that Patsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich are speaking from a crip positionality and from the genealogy of thought therein.

It is *absolutely* my favor of neurodivergence[6] that also led to me looking up the etymology of the word crisis while I was listening to the episode. Taken from the Greek *krisis,* crisis has been an inflection of cripistemology all along. It references a "decisive point in the progress of a disease" or a "turning point in a disease, that change which indicates recovery or death."[7] Our friends Merriam and Webster offer a slightly different take, defining crisis as "an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending."[8] Crisis as a point of

discernment, a point where knowledge arises from a state of disease, or dis-ease, or as one might say, dis-ablement…

What meaning can we make of crisis today through this historicity when, as Patsavas asserts, chaos is the point? There is a moment about halfway through the episode where Danylevich and Patsavas begin a discussion about the different kinds of silence that arise from within and respond to crisis. Danylevich proposes two types: hegemonic silence and crip silence. In what follows, I aim to extrapolate and reorganize the powerful thinking of my colleagues and think alongside them.

Hegemonic Silence

Hegemonic silence is when silence is used against us. When we are silenced. This "we" is the "we" who collectively make up the majority yet remain minoritized. Hegemonic silence is silence that is weaponized to maintain the status quo. Its utilization is in service of systemic and ideological oppression. To identify hegemonic silence, we must start by identifying power and mapping power relations. Individual intention must give way to the weight of intergenerational impact.

Hegemonic silence is a silence forced upon us. It is also a chosen silence, with a "political agenda not to listen" as Danylevich remarks. It is choosing not to know or try to know or make space for knowing because doing so would disrupt power structures. Of course, this is the silence of our so-called political leaders about [author gestures emphatically to space around her] literally everything. And it is also the silence we are socialized into upholding because "we don't talk politics at the dinner table" especially the white dinner table on that Thursday in November. Hegemonic silence is internalized, justified, and perpetuated as acceptable silence.

Crip Silence

The distinction between hegemonic silence and non-hegemonic silence is a difference in socio-political power and agency. I have no anthropological source to back my statement, but I'd wager that oppressed peoples have always utilized silence in reclamation of our own empowerment. This episode's crip theorizing of silence expands upon many other theorizations from marginalized peoples, persons, and fields of academic inquiry.

As I imagined myself sitting around the kitchen table—who am I kidding? My crip ass eats meals on the couch. As I imagined myself eating food lounging around with Aly, Alyson, Jess and Theodora, I imagined the five us enumerating six ways of thinking about crip silence. Of course, one of us says, "but there has to be more than six." "Oh sure" another one of us remarks, "but maybe that's because there are really five. I mean who can know and does it even matter anyway?" We all nod in agreement, without saying a word.

1. Crip silence as survival

Our bodyminds[9] do amazing things to support our survival. When not pathologized, we can understand silence in so many ways. Late in this episode, Whatcott speaks from a place of vulnerability and reclaims the silence their bodymind demands as necessary. Silence as a form of somatic resourcing. We are non-verbal or we become non-verbal because that is what's necessary for our survival, for life to be livable, regardless of whether it "makes sense" to others. We move into silence when we are overwhelmed or overstimulated. We freeze. We stim. We retreat. Our bodyminds move us into silence to signify a deeper need and give us care.

Our crip bodyminds choose silence too. We remain silent because we know. We know in our bones that the things we would say could get us killed. This choice

isn't one. It isn't appeasement or agreement. It's an act of survival in a world that wasn't built for us and is actively trying to eradicate us. It's not telling the doctors or social workers the whole truth because if we do, we won't get the resources we need to live. Our silences may be lies of omission, but they are necessitated by the carceral state whose executive orders justify putting people in cages. If we speak, we risk institutionalization and, as Spurgas reminds us of, the unapologetic resurgence of eugenics logic means this risk is one of life or death.

2. Crip silence as refusal

We're silent because words fail us, but we don't mind. We refuse the diagnostic imperative to conform our experiences in exchange. For us unrecognizability isn't a problem. We're silent because of the "limitations of language and the conventionality of most people's thinking."[10] We refuse to explain ourselves because we didn't agree to these terms. In fact, we reject them entirely. Why must we translate ourselves into the language of the oppressor, when the oppressor has already decided not to understand us, before we even speak? What if we didn't worship the spoken word?[11] What if we embraced our complexities instead of trying to confine ourselves? If recognizability is only possible through diminishing our complexity, are we really being recognized?

There can be power in remaining unknown and unknowable, in refusing comprehension. We don't need spoken words to make meaning or connect. We have other ways.

3. Crip silence as solidarity

Early in the episode, Patsavas details the emergence of "cripistemology" as a neologism that, like "any good neologism names something that community already knows." Later, Patsavas references Spurgas's work in saying that silence

can be solidarity in falling apart because silence is what community gives us by "removing the imperative" for speech. Silence is a neologism.

Silence as solidarity is not an absence or a void, but of a deep *presence*-ing. It is the silence of listening, of witnessing, of memory work. It is the kind of connection from a shared place of knowing that doesn't need or even want words. It is the nod from across the room saying, "I see you." We use silence to hold space and create space that can hold us. We move in and with crip silence as a way of being and being with one another without trying to fix a problem or find a solution. There is no momentum in these acts of silence, just presence-ing. Just being. Alone. Together.

4. Crip silence as slowness

In a dominant culture of manufactured urgency, it is a revolutionary act to move slowly. Crip silence is in the slowness of our need for time to process. It is not a deficit but a cultivation of intentionality. Crip silence also appears to be slowness when really it reflects the hyper speeds in which our minds jump from thought to thought. This is not a deficit either, but rather the gap between our thinking and your insistence for normative "logic" and "comprehension."

There is wisdom in thinking and moving slowly, in refusing the urgency of white supremacy culture,[12] even for those of us who didn't or wouldn't choose it. When we allow ourselves to think outside of pathologization, slowness becomes a respite where deliberate, intentional ways of knowing and being are cultivated. As Patsavas reminds us, when your world is smaller it's easier to connect with meaning in every moment. The flip side that comes with urgency, manufactured or otherwise, is erasure.

5. Crip silence as imagining otherwise

Disabled life is an art form[13] where creativity is our tool of survival in a world that was not built for us and actively seeks our eradication. Through creative expression, meaning can be made and communicated in ways that aren't otherwise available. This is true in so many disabled experiences, including those of us who do not use spoken language to communicate. Through creative expression, worlds and futures can be imagined and mapped out in visionary ways that aren't allowed in our current material reality.

Art also reminds us that when we are making meaning the silence matters just as much as the sound. The words we say in poetry and the notes we play in music mean different things if we change the silences that surround them. Like all constructed binaries, the two are intertwined and interdependent.[14] As with disability and ability, Alison Kafer teaches us, this relationality is political.[15]

6. Crip silence as joyfulness

Silence can sometimes afford us a particular experience of spacetime[16] wherein we can be fully present and completely elsewhere all at once. I find joy in that and comfort in this kind of solitude. I deeply appreciate the discussion of joy that helped conclude this episode. Because even for those of us who will admit to having a hard time accessing it (I'm with you, Alyson Spurgas), cultivating joy—and its accompanying gratitude—is a revolutionary practice.

I see silence as integral to meaning making in every practice of joy that Patsavas, Spurgas, Whatcott, and Danylevich named, even—or perhaps especially—when it comes alongside sound: Reading, walking a dog, gardening, playing music and engaging in mutual aid—these practices connect us to something bigger than ourselves. As does the silent act of holding space, of holding up the crumbling

walls of academia, so that our students can experience the joys of critically thinking and imaging otherwise.

Conclusion

Do not get it twisted. Like Patsavas, I have no interest in glorifying or romanticizing silence. I too have become more disabled since we wrote *Cripistemologies of Crisis,* and it is not easy or fun. (Spoiler alert: You too will become more disabled if you live long enough). My proposition in this commentary is that we learn to embrace the both/and, holding the multiple truths of silence all at once. At a critical point in the episode, Spurgas brings us back to mapping power and understanding solidarity as a verb. She asks whose responsibility it is to think about why silence is occurring, what kind of silence it is, who is responsible for responding. Who is responsible for speaking out when others cannot. My answer—which isn't mine at all but the answer of my crip, mad, ill, and neurodivergent elders and ancestors—is that we are all responsible.[17]

Audio Transcript

[00:00:00] **Delores Phillips:** Welcome to *Positions*: The Podcast of the Cultural Studies Association, sponsored and published through the Open Source Journal *Lateral*. Positions aims to provide critical reflection and examination on topics in cultural studies for scholars, students, and a general audience. Make sure to follow CSA and *Lateral* on socials and subscribe to our podcast to keep up with new episodes.

[00:00:32] **Delores:** In today's episode, I'm joined by the CSA Crip Cultures Critical Disability Studies Working Group co-chair, Theodora Danylevich, in conversation with: Jess Whatcott, author of *Menace to the Future*, published in 2024 by Duke University Press; Alyson Patsavas, author of the forthcoming book

from University of Michigan Press titled *Pain in Relation*. And Alyson K. Spurgas, author of the 2020 monograph [00:01:00] *Diagnosing Desire*, published by Ohio State University Press, and co-author of *Decolonize Self-Care*, published by OR Books in 2022. Today we discuss crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy. Enjoy the conversation.

[00:01:19] **Theodora Danylevich:** Yeah, so why don't we go around and we'll introduce ourselves. I am Theodora Danylevich, pronouns: she and they. I teach at Georgetown. I am co-chair of the Crip Cultures Working Group at the Cultural Studies Association.

[00:01:43] **Jess Whatcott:** I am Jess Whatcott. I use they/them pronouns. Professionally, I am an assistant professor, but I'm up for tenure at San Diego State University and I teach in a Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies department. I want to shout out my recent book, [00:02:00] *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics*, which came out with Duke University Press in September. I theorize the concept that detention, institutionalization, and incarceration are forms of eugenics. But I also want to say that I am an abolitionist organizer, a relative, a community member. I'm a sci-fi and comics nerd, and I come from a white, working class community, which is a majority Christian sect, I guess I'll say. And I come from a family with many undiagnosed and untreated disabilities, chronic illnesses, mental and wellness, and neurodivergence, including myself. Happy to be here.

[00:02:50] **Aly Patsavas:** My name is Aly Patsavas. I'm an assistant professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at the University of Illinois, Chicago. I'm also up for [00:03:00] tenure this year, so that's exciting, and looking forward to the–I don't know–exhale that that offers, I hope. I have a book forthcoming with the University of Michigan press called *Pain in Relation* that looks at cripepistemologies of pain, so kind of building a little bit on some of the work that Theodora and I did co-editing *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* that we are

here to talk about today. I am a dog parent. I think that's the most interesting anecdote. And I just recently adopted a second pit bull puppy. So that is bringing me a little bit of joy in these very difficult, and, I don't know, precarious times. So I feel like we take what we can get.

[00:03:49] **Alyson Spurgas:** I'm Alyson Spurgas, and really honored to be here with you all. Professionally. I am an associate professor, fairly recently tenured, at Trinity College in the Sociology department, and I'm also affiliated faculty in the Women and Gender and Sexuality program. I have done some different organizing, and I'm trying to find the best place to put my energies in that regard right now. I'm trying to immerse myself in work in the higher ed experience at Trinity and Hartford, supporting students for justice in Palestine and the AAUP, since we don't have a union–private college–and I also love cats. I'm a cat parent. Yeah. And I have a couple books that I've written. One is called *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the 21st Century*. And the piece that I wrote for *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* is an extension of my conclusion chapter where I really think through what it would mean to [00:05:00] fall apart primarily for feminized people and traumatized people to do that together, and I try to center, trans women of color's narratives within that framework. And then I also wrote a book called *Decolonize Self-Care*, along with my friend Zoë Meleo-Erwin.

[00:05:18] **Theodora:** Thanks so much, everyone. Yeah. I guess I should mention, I'm also a cat parent and I am a contingent faculty, and with that I'm doing a lot of labor organizing and other organizing at Georgetown.

[00:05:31] **Theodora:** So Jen [Scuro] and I decided to invite you all to come chat with us because while *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* edited small collection that we published together, all four of us plus Angela Carter, in 2021 was conceived and then published at sort of an unfortunately [00:06:00] parallel moment in Trump 1.0. We put it together sort of in that context and how crisis rhetorics were being deployed. So here we are, a whole pandemic and second Trump term. Now

both a part of our ongoing crisis backdrops, one might say? What *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* was trying to do was both respond to a moment, but I think also put a finer point on what we mean by cripistemologies, by thinking about the constructed exceptionalism and episodic rhetoric of crisis and emergency that is in dissonance with a disabled experience and that can erase. The knowledge and strategy that lies within.

[00:07:00] **Aly:** The term *cripistemology* comes from Merri Lisa Johnson in conversation with Robert McRuer, where they were talking about disability specific knowledge production, but not just from the experiences of disabled people, but I think very specifically the knowledge that emerges from a kind of critical crip politic–that sensibility of the world by living with and in relation to disability, chronic illness, madness. She kind of coined the term cripistemology, and then it took a little bit of a life of its own that I think is kind of a fun trajectory that they trace in their introduction to the special issue [of the *Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies*] "Cripistemologies" in 2014, where it sort of became a term that traveled via social media before the actual publication of the special issue where they kind of elaborate on it. To me, I think that history is really important because it speaks to [00:08:00] something about what the best neologisms do: they name something that the community already knows. And I think that's part of what they did with cripistemologies, which literally just sort of puts "crip" and "epistemologies" together. But it's something that I think activists and organizers and disabled people and the crip community sort of knew immediately what it meant even as over the last ten, probably 15 years–if we go back to the original social media conversation that it sparked–have continued to elaborate on that.

[00:08:36] **Jess:** So in 2018 when we first had the panel at American Studies Association, I, at the time, was thinking about the Tubbs Fire, which in 2017 had burned millions of acres in Napa County and Sonoma County, which are north of [00:09:00] San Francisco in California. But that fire had moved from the sort of

forest area into the incorporated city of Santa Rosa, and it killed 22 people, and it destroyed I think something like 5,000 structures, including businesses and homes. So there were people who had escaped this fire–it came so quickly. There were stories of people who jumped into swimming pools as fires raged around them. And then the Camp Fire happened the following year in 2018, which was in–kind of north of Sacramento, in North Central California. And it was in a more rural area, and it just devastated some small towns and sort of ex-urban places where people were living. It ended up killing 85 people and destroying 18,000 structures.

[00:10:00] **Jess:** So that was, yeah, the context within which I was thinking about Octavia Butler's novel, *Parable of the Sower*, which, shortly after the beginning of that book, the plot moves forward when there's a fire that cuts through the neighborhood where the protagonist is living. And in my article, I was thinking about Octavia Butler as someone who didn't necessarily identify as disabled, but had a learning disability and wrote a character who has a sort of made up disability called hyperempathy syndrome, which is a, you know, it's an actual disability—like, the character experiences it as disabling throughout the text. So I was thinking about this as a manual for survival of things like fire and other crises. So, cut to 2025: this [00:11:00] January was the Palisades Fire and the Eaton Fire in Los Angeles. People, including disabled folks....you know, we still are uncovering stories about folks who could not evacuate, and there was no infrastructure to evacuate those folks, due to them either being disabled or being caregivers for disabled people that they didn't want to leave behind.

[00:11:30] **Jess:** And the Eaton Fire swept through the historically black city of Altadena, which is just adjacent to Pasadena, where Octavia Butler grew up and the fire came up to the outskirts of the cemetery where Octavia Butler is buried. And the point I want to make is to sort of connect these two fires, or these three fires–2017, 2018, 2025–to think about the ongoing natures of the [00:12:00] emergencies that we're facing and the decades of divestment, crumbling infrastructure, almost non-existent safety nets, climate chaos, leading to repeated

disasters, mass, premature death. I think it just shows that these are–to go back to one of the points made in the introduction of the special issue–these are not exceptional crises, but they're chronic and they're just layering on top of each other even as we're seeing an acceleration of some versions of those crises in the present. So, um, yeah. When I wrote my piece, I felt very nervous about it because I'm sort of making this anarchist argument that we can't rely on the government to survive climate chaos and neoliberal abandonment, but every time one of these disasters happens, it just makes this point more urgent than ever: I think that we have to figure out how to take care of each other, especially as we're seeing the dismantling of the limited. [00:13:00] Safety net that we had with the federal government and increasing climate chaos.

[00:13:04] **Theodora:** I mean, there is something about what you were saying, Jess, in Octavia Butler's anticipation of the failure of the status quo, which I think in itself is, you know, really powerful and something that may be a bit easier for us to see now. And there's something about close reading and good analysis being prophetic that I think I want to sort of throw in there, and that it's not actually about looking to the future, it's actually about learning from patterns and learning from history.

[00:13:43] **Alyson:** There wasn't like a specific event that was happening that made me write what I wrote in "Solidarity and Falling Apart" because I think it's so chronic—like, the issues that namely trans women of color experience, black trans women, [00:14:00] and also just people who are assaulted, who are traumatized, who experience gendered and sexualized kind of structural violence, including through the carceral state. I think it is so normalized and so chronic that there wasn't just like one event to point to. So kind of like in Trump 1.0, there were so many different things that were happening, right? I think just that whole experience of going through Trump 1.0 and then leading into COVID. I mean, I write in the piece about a Latina trans activist in New York City named Lorena Borjas, who died in April, 2020, very early on in the pandemic and of COVID, and

Cecilia Gentili, who was another New York City based trans activist and writer, and who has actually now passed away. [00:15:00] [Gentili] wrote a piece that actually ended up in the *New York Times* about the loss of this woman's life and how it affected so many other people, how it became this–just losing this person, even as it was so commonplace, it was one of the first documented deaths of a trans woman activist at this time, you know, from COVID. And I think it's actually worth reading the quote from the piece by Cecilia Gentili, who says: "Many of us have been forsaken by our families, found ourselves homeless and deprived of support from teachers, coworkers, and employers. We've lived through extreme poverty, have made cohabitation with risk and danger part of our normal. Transgender women of color–like she was, like I am–know the uncertainty of taking each step as if it may be our last. We know the weariness of walking under the weight of transphobia, racism, and misogyny."

[00:15:53] **Alyson:** So she's writing this at the beginning of COVID, you know, and I think losing this person is what [00:16:00] makes her wanted to write about this. But again, it's just is so commonplace. So I think, I mean there were many things swirling around for me when I wrote my piece, in that context. I mean, it was also meant to be, like I said, a kind of extension of the final chapter of my book, which was an intervention into the DSM-5 diagnosis of female sexual interest/arousal disorder. I basically extend my critique of that diagnosis– and it's gendering and racializing the idea that only white women are affected by certain kinds of sexual problems, and that it's this kind of cis, straight issue of women's low desire–I try to extend this to think about the actual traumas that people experience, particularly women and feminized people. I extend that discussion into a different diagnosis, which is CPTSD, complex post-traumatic stress disorder, [00:17:00] and in the piece I kind of take that on to say, okay, in the early nineties, Judith Herman, who's widely recognized as like an important kind of feminist, psychoanalyst thinker, invokes or, you know, kind of creates this new diagnosis, CPTSD, to say that women too experience trauma, you know, can experience post-traumatic stress disorder going beyond just male soldiers, for instance, and

the shellshock they might experience. And she extends it to say, for example, domestic violence. Like, this is this kind of chronic, ongoing experience that some women have, and it needs to be examined in this kind of chronic way. But even with that diagnosis, she still ends up maintaining certain, I think, fairly conservative, psychoanalytic ideas about what trauma looks like, including around dissociation, including around certain responses.

[00:17:57] **Alyson:** And my argument in this piece for [00:18:00] *The Cripistemologies of Crisis* special section is to say: What about people who don't have the hallmarks of trauma, who don't exhibit symptoms in the same way, you know, or whose symptoms aren't identifiable within a white, historically conservative psychoanalytic lexicon? So I think about what this looks like for different populations of people–again, femme, feminine, and feminized people. And then I'm also kind of pushing back, within the psychological literature, on the idea that the whole point of having a diagnosis is to figure out how to correct and cure and make people in a population work harder and be more productive under neoliberal, racial capitalism. And so my ultimate argument in this piece is: What can we learn from people who are traumatized, who [00:19:00] are violated, and who have different kinds of experiences that may not reflect the normal ways of thinking about trauma or its symptomology, but who also have taken care of each other in the face of that, and who have come together and have found ways to support each other. And that's kind of the idea of solidarity and falling apart. And so, the idea is to think beyond just healing or cure within that neoliberal framework, but instead: What does it look like to heal alongside other people who are still harmed, but still surviving and still making space for themselves and each other in a world that doesn't want them, that doesn't take their pain seriously.

[00:19:45] **Theodora:** Well, as I was rereading our introduction, I was reminded of the time that we spent on *time*. There is a concern, right, about the way in which disability is in some sort of a suspended present [00:20:00] and the notion of a past, a history, and the notion of a future are not afforded in the temporality that

disability and crip experience operates. And so, I think thinking about both of your pieces and what the work that your analysis is doing is super important to both of these things. With Alyson, the thinking and work that you're doing with rethinking trauma and gender and this notion of *un*-narratability actually being about this political agenda not to listen, and the illegibility. And then with Jess we're sort of then looking at a text that offers [00:21:00] us a sort of roadmap for what futures could look like, and that both of these things also operate through specific orientations to understanding disability as relational.

[00:21:16] **Aly:** Part of what Angela Carter's piece does so well is recognize this activism–the sort of powerful moment in González 's speech. Angela Carter reads X González's speech in March for Our Lives rally, where González holds the stage for the number of minutes that the gun violence assault at the school was happening. And I think that there is something in both Angela's reading and the move that she makes or leverages to see that as crip theorizing that I think is so in line with the [00:22:00] move of disability justice activism and the recognizing that Crip wisdom is happening across spaces that we may or may not look to as sources of Crip and disability knowledge.

[00:22:14] **Aly:** You know, part of what we were theorizing in the introduction was what we lose in this sort of urgency that crisis rhetoric mobilizes–that so many disabled people's lives and thinking just can't keep up with–and that's one of the places of harm that crisis rhetoric or crisis, I dunno. Capitalism mobilizes is that things move so fast, that intervention feels impossible. It feels urgent in ways that actually forward so much erasure. And so thinking about what that insistence that we hold time and space, even when it's uncomfortable, even when this sort of like [00:23:00] demand for action and response is so strong, which is sort of what that moment that Angela writes about to me kind of encapsulates: to call into question not just the idea that, you know, this crisis is exceptional, but also that "crisis" has to create equally urgent responses in ways that elide consideration of

disabled people's lives, people of color's lives, queer people's lives that are so easy to dismiss in the service of urgent action.

[00:23:37] **Aly:** And that to me is what feels particularly relevant to the moment we're in when chaos is the point. And there is so much urgency–manufactured urgency, but strategic urgency–and if we can't hold the space and even allow those sort of [00:24:00] moments of silence to let all the voices that are impacted come to the surface, that to me feels like just as much of an urgent project as to hold the space where we can have considered conversation, where the silences can actually be read and heard and mined.

[00:24:20] **Alyson:** Just quickly–just thinking about the silences and the spaces of silence that we can read in different ways, but that are often kind of understood as *illegible*, really connects to part of what I'm arguing in in my essay, which is that there is this particular way that trauma is supposed to look, and even if you have CPTSD, this is what it looks like, and it's this kind of dissociation and it's this symptomology. And also–kind of like ontologically–to framings of trauma is the idea that it's unspeakable, which I think Theodora mentioned briefly about my piece as well, that it's unspeakable. [00:25:00] But what I'm trying to kind of raise is not to say ddissociation doesn't happen–because yes, it happens to people, many people, who have experienced traumatizing events–but it doesn't always register in the exact same way. It doesn't look the same way. Not everyone can afford to have the same experience of being traumatized. And so that's where I think race and class and being of different kinds of gender statuses–you know, like a non-cis, legible status, certain kinds of feminist status–it's just not going to read the same way. But to get to the point that Aly was–that I want to connect to–is that it requires kind of like a different kind of communication.

[00:25:44] **Alyson:** And so in this idea of falling apart and solidarity within that, is the idea that there can be new and different ways of communicating about trauma or expressing it or coming together around shared experiences or experiences

that are not the exact same, [00:26:00] that different people may actually experience differently because of race and gender and class differences, but that there can still be support systems and support networks around experiences like this, and that that is already happening. It's part of disability justice frameworks, right? That people like Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha are talking about, and other folks…. But yeah, that we could pay attention. Like, what would it mean to pay attention to what is already happening, and what forms of communication are occurring, that might be more affective, or might be just demonstrated through various kinds of support or through holding space for people's silences, rather than being expected to try to narrate and fail, or, I don't know, the ways that this is often read.

[00:26:48] **Jess:** I just wanted to pick up on this thread of the sort of context of crip of color critique that we were thinking [00:27:00] within, and I think the difference for me between when we wrote this issue and now is immersing myself more in what are some are calling southern disability studies. And when I first wrote my piece, I didn't live in the borderlands, and I live in the borderlands now. So what comes up for me is the scale of the crisis is so much bigger than I realized when I was first writing. I live next to one of the busiest border crossings in the world, and there are tens of thousands of people trying to come to where I live in San Diego to seek asylum. And at various points, the process of legally requesting asylum has been shut down: COVID, and now all sorts of emergency declarations. And so people are still trying. There's now a 30-foot border wall that people try to climb, [00:28:00] and there are coyotes that put up ladders on both sides, but they have limited time because of the surveillance. And so, people try to climb, and then they fall from this wall. And there are people trying to climb through the ocean. And so weekly, there are stories of boats that are found overturned, or that have crashed, and people have drowned. And there are also people trying to cross through the desert in terrible weather, either in the heat or the extreme cold. And there are organizations devoted to providing water to

folks–they go out, they hike out and they put water in the desert–and those folks have been criminalized.

[00:28:43] **Jess:** So I guess what I'm trying to say is the amount of death is unfathomable. What I'm trying to get at is *unfathomability*, and how have crip knowledges–especially activist knowledges–how have we tried to grapple with this [00:29:00] unfathomability, and I think that the power of silence is one of the ways that we've tried to do that, right? A moment of silence, moments of silence, just being with each other. I don't know. I'd love to think more about that with you all, but that was something that was coming up for me in this conversation about silence.

[00:29:22] **Theodora:** Also what's on my mind is what's going on in Gaza and Palestine, and that's also in this category of like the unfathomable, yeah. I think I'm grappling with the silence because I think there's silence that is, you know, maybe important, but then there's like two kinds of silences, right? And then there's the silence that is harmful. So how can we differently describe the silence of maybe listening. I don't know....Would it be like a crip silence versus a hegemonic silence? I don't know.

[00:30:00] **Aly:** Yeah, versus the silence that hides the scale that you're talking about, Jess– like, just the sheer scale of devastation and harm, like silence as deployed by the very systems that benefit from the erasure of those harms, and the silence that–interventions into those systems of oppression are meant to intervene in. And I mean that's I think part of why time and considered thinking, alongside organizing work, is also necessary–why these are sort of two, in the best cases, collaborative projects where we can be thinking about how to parse through the multiple ways that silence can get wielded as a tool of harm, and how we can subvert it, while at the same time having activists and organizers present us with the actual landscape, and gather on the ground, [00:31:00] the true picture of scale that I think is so hard to see.

[00:31:05] **Theodora:** You know, what this turn in the discussion is doing is maybe sort of bringing us to how there's a certain context that we're now faced with, and maybe grappling with in terms of how can we theorize and respond and work towards justice in this context of massive scale of mass death and disablement. But then also this context of fabricated instability that foments this constant emergency, at least within our nation-state. While it is all something that, you know, sort of moves us to want to act, I think what folks are saying is that there's a component [00:32:00] also of listening and mapping that maybe isn't as fast and immediate.

[00:32:05] **Alyson:** If we pay attention to the kinds of destruction and mass disablement and death that Jess is describing, it can like create, it's like: freeze! Like, you don't even know what to do. And I think that's a feeling that a lot of people are having right now. And so, when I am having conversations with people around organizing and around just like, literally, what can we–what can people do? First of all, I mean, some people–I think what we're all talking about to some degree is that–some folks have been doing it for a long time, right? And some of us here have been, in different ways, but also we can pay attention to other people who do the work to sustain their own lives and the lives of their kin and friend groups and families.

[00:32:52] **Alyson:** And yeah, I don't know. It might be a moment to like take stock, to pay more attention to look at that. [00:33:00] I listened to an episode of the *Death Panel* podcast recently with Vicky Osterweil and Beatrice Adler-Bolton–I think that Jess was on actually a different episode, so maybe they can talk about that–but it was a good episode, and Vicky was talking about that you just have to do–like, to some degree, the stuff that we do can be really small. It can be like: every day, you just do a little thing. And partially because we need to survive, and also because we care about our neighbors surviving, and our neighborhoods, and our communities. I mean, it's mutual aid, right? Jess talked about anarchism. I mean, it's just some basic mutual aid, anarchist kinds of strategies that disabled

people have had to do for a long time. So, I don't know. I'm thinking about that–and it can also be fun. I know that none of this has sounded fun at all, and we're not talking about things that are fun.

[00:34:00] **Alyson:** So this is a weird shift in the conversation, and maybe this is not the right moment for it, but I think at some point in this podcast, it would be good to say: well, what actually does it mean to try to hold onto some semblance of freaking joy and pleasure in the face of all of this right now? I was thinking–I was hoping, Jess, you could maybe go back briefly to silence as a kind of strategy, of like a productive, useful strategy for disabled folks. Because I heard what [Theodora] was saying about there's different ways of thinking about silence, and I think in my piece, I'm talking more about the problems with silencing.

[00:34:38] **Jess:** I guess I was thinking about the "moment of silence" that often occurs like at a rally, or a protest, or a gathering–and also, the ways that people use the vigil as a strategy, which is, you know, a mostly silent gathering of people, you know, with candles. [00:35:00] Or I've also been at protests where people are mostly quietly making art together, making a mural, or chalking the streets. And you know, I think that could also occur. I've also witnessed it occur in digital spaces, where people have asked to take a moment of silence, or to be together through a visualization or a meditation. I was also thinking about silence as a survival strategy, you know, and the way that sometimes remaining silent is how someone gets through traumatic experience, or the ways that—like, something that happens to me sometimes, when I might be triggered or dysregulated, is that I experience–what do they call it–selective mutism, or I have difficulty speaking, and you know, that's been very hard in the past. But in my healing process, I've been working on accepting that [00:36:00] that's part of what my body is doing to help me get through the moment.

[00:36:05] **Jess:** So, I dunno. Those are some of the things that I was thinking about in terms of silence, and I absolutely agree that silence is also weaponized and used to obscure epistemologies and erase knowledge all the time. And we definitely live, I think, in a culture where that is preferred as a way of maintaining the status quo, versus other places I've been in the world. I went to Argentina last summer, which had this terrible military dictatorship, which disappeared 30,000 people between 1976 and 1983. And the culture there is very much oriented towards what they call "memory work." You know, there are people who are memory workers who create museums and, you know, do investigative journalism, and those kinds of things.... But it's also part of the [00:37:00] culture that people go to these museums and memory spaces, and they talk all the time. You know, they have dinner very late, and then they stay after dinner and talk for two or three hours. So it's an everyday practice of engaging in memory work. And so, I think that that's a very different orientation in parts of the south that are part of the Global South, I want to say. So, I don't know. Those are some of the things I was thinking about.

[00:37:29] **Alyson:** Thank you so much, Jess. That makes so much sense. And the one thing that did just come up really briefly for me is just–I'm thinking about when people, when groups are silent, like, where the onus falls on, whose responsibility it is to pay attention, to think about why the silence is occurring. And I think that's really useful too, to think about: Well, if a group is silent because they need to take a step back, they need to be silent, maybe then other people should be stepping [00:38:00] in to try to listen, to try to discern what's going on, and then raise that story, right? Like raise it up from the folks who maybe are tired of trying to speak or tell their story too.

[00:38:12] **Aly:** Yeah, I don't know. I'm thinking about–this is Aly–that something that you were talking about, Jess—like, the ways that silence is produced from your very specific bodymind experience, that comes from a context of overstimulation. I relate to that. I think one of the biggest things that has changed

for me since the first *Cripistemologies of Crisis* issue and now is I've gotten a lot more disabled, I've gotten sicker, I've gotten more pain in ways that have really fundamentally changed sort of how I move in the world. And from that, I have changed, sort of, some methodologies of writing and thinking. It's produced a different way of being–not just being in the world, but thinking and doing my work. And so, thinking about that, [00:39:00] you talked about the sort of healing journey, it's like seeing silence as something that–I am projecting now, so I'll just own it–For me, the silence has also been, I think, part of seeing it not as I can't interact with the world right now–not that my body is producing silence–but it *needs* silence. Like, I need to sort of—"sensory detox" is probably not necessarily the best word, but that's how I've been kind of thinking about it–in order to reengage in meaningful ways. And the world has gotten a lot smaller, because I've needed a lot more time and space and quiet.

[00:39:42] **Aly:** And that's fundamentally changed how I've interacted with the world, but it's not necessarily like, I think what it would be read outside as loss, but it's also been restorative and healing. And there's a connection here that I'm trying to make about the sort of [00:40:00] crip silence that you're talking about, Theodora—like, it's conditioned by the pressure of the world around us or by disablement. But part of what cripistemologies do is sort of find ways through that and find survival mechanisms in hostile environments and worlds. And I think that's the difference. It's like we need a thing, but then for me–again, I'm projecting keep it close–for me, I have needed that silence. I have needed quiet, and I've needed to be a lot more deliberate about how I engage with the world, which has actually helped me target energies in ways that have been far more meaningful. And it's not like to revalue it, right? I think there's always this danger where cripistemologies is like: Oh, we produce valuable knowledge from our disabled bodymind, so it's all fine. Now, it does kind of [00:41:00] suck. It can come from really, really terrible traumas and painful ways of being in the world. But out of necessity, we have found ways to live and move in that, and that is what's helped me see when silence is, for me, necessary and restorative, versus

when I am conditioned to be silent as survival mechanism from a world that is asking me to be that way. Those are two very different things.

[00:41:28] **Alyson:** I really appreciate what you're saying, Aly, and I really appreciate the idea of crip silence. I have also felt really bad in the last few years and, as a pretty serious migraine sufferer–I didn't talk about my own disabilities, and I don't need to have that as part of my bio, but I have terrible, terrible migraines that are increasing, and a lot of chronic pain, and autoimmune disorders, and various other structural bodily conditions that cause me pain—and it's been so bad in the last several years. But there has been some [00:42:00] respite in just being quiet and cultivating a practice of just being quiet and being silent and…. Yeah, I just wanted to flag that that really resonated with me.

[00:42:10] **Aly:** I'm thinking about what "solidarity and falling apart" looks like. I think for me it comes partly from not that something is inexpressible, but that it doesn't have to be [expressed]—the removal of the imperative to give something language is what community gives you. And what that kind of connection—like: I see you move in a particular way, and I know you're hurting; or, I see your engagement with the world change, and I know something about that, not because I know exactly what you feel, but because I can mobilize a certain kind of knowledge that either I have, or I'm in relation to other people [who] have. And then we don't have to say the thing. And that, that to me, I think is a [00:43:00] building block of crip community spaces, and I think that can be a building block for something.

[00:43:06] **Jess:** I wanted to at some point bring up, because I wrote my piece about speculative fiction, about a novel–but maybe I could connect it here to think about the ways that art and music and poetry have been used by disabled, mad, neurodivergent folks to both convey the unfathomable, or the things that are difficult to say, and to be with each other when we can't always be with each other physically or virtually. And so, I also think a lot about that these are places

where we imagine crip futurity, and we imagine alternative futures. We imagine how we're going to survive. We imagine worlds that we [00:44:00] might thrive in. Walidah Imarisha uses the term *visionary fiction*, which is thinking about fiction in particular that sort of allows us to play around with different responses and solutions, to also sort of imagine—which is what Octavia Butler was doing, where she was like: Well if things keep going the way that they are, this is what I think is going to happen—But it's also a place that we can sort of imagine how different responses might work out, and see where they end up. And *Parable [of the Sower]* is very much doing that sort of thinking. There's this sort of mishmash between the folks that want to sort of hunker down and ignore what's happening and maintain the status quo, versus this teenager who is [saying]: We can't. We have to adapt, we have to adapt to current realities, and we have to create new ways of living and being in relation. And it turns out that she's right.

[00:44:58] **Jess:** So I do think that I've just [00:45:00]—and also turning back to Alyson's point about where we finding joy—I've definitely been reading a lot of science fiction and speculative fiction lately. I'm finding a lot of joy in that, and in ways in being, you know, with others through that. But I do—and maybe Alyson could talk a little bit more about white feminism and eugenics—but there is a long history of sort of utopian, speculative fiction also being used to promote eugenics ideas and to imagine a wonderful future that is done by getting rid of disabled people, getting rid of madness, getting rid of neurodivergence. You know, just thinking about—Alison Kafer talked about this in *Feminist, Queer, Crip*—the book by Marge Piercy….What's it called?

[00:45:53] **Alyson:** *Woman on the Edge of Time*?

[00:45:54] **Jess:** *Woman on the Edge of Time*, yes! And how that book brings about its feminist future [00:46:00] precisely by getting rid of crip futurity. And so, yeah. I think there's a lot of danger there. And so, what does it mean to [have] instead speculative fiction that is exactly imagining what crip futurity, mad futurity,

neurodivergent futurity—like, what all of that looks like, in giving us these horizons that we can keep striving towards. So, yeah. Being creative, and reading other people's creative work right now, is definitely what's giving me joy in the moment.

[00:46:34] **Alyson:** I feel like I have to kind of backtrack a little bit out of the joy, unfortunately, to go back to—as I said, in an unhappy way—to white feminism and carceral feminism and the ways that anti-trans ideologies are being not only taken up publicly and popularly and culturally, but now enforced through governmental [00:47:00] policy, edicts, and things. So, yeah. I mean, I'm just thinking about J.K. Rowling's support for the–what was it called? The Scotland for Women Commission [For Women Scotland], whatever it was—that just pushed the U.K. Supreme Court to define a woman as someone who is, supposedly, biologically a woman and to cut out trans women from that definition. And then thinking about the U.S. situation, with the White House's [Executive Order] "Defending Women from Gender Ideology Extremism and Restoring Biological Truth to the Federal Government." Unfortunately, in 2025, I think that what I was writing about in this piece, and what you all were writing about—what this entire special section is about—is more relevant than ever. It's really coming to pass, like that these terrible things are happening and becoming worse and worse, and we have to push back against them. [00:48:00] I mean, the good news is that even though this Supreme Court decision did happen in the U.K., thousands of people came out and protested. People are protesting and pushing back, and there are amazing, on-the-ground movements that are recentering trans women, and are looking toward gender abolition, and are highly utopian, right? And are thinking in beautiful, amazing ways, and also centering disabled folks within that as well.

[00:48:30] **Alyson:** I'm still trying to find joy. I think I don't have a lot of access to joy on a daily basis, unfortunately, but I am trying to figure out more and more ways to connect with that. Maybe I should get some reading recommendations from Jess. But yeah. I mean, doing various mutual aid, you know, when there's like, when we have space to do things like that, I think is one place. Taking time for

crip silence. I play music–something I do… [00:49:00] and those are spaces where I find joy.

[00:49:02] **Theodora:** I think what you were saying about mutual aid as a space to find joy is totally valid. I feel like organizing, for me, has been a space to find joy, because the alternative to me is not viable—not just not joyful, but not viable. I wanted to throw in something about the late capitalist corporate university, and how weirdly, as an adjunct who has always been contingent, always, officially never having job security, I think in this dark way, there is a hope with what's happening that now people are seeing, or maybe–you know, to me it's, well, it was always like this—but to some people, it's now suddenly like this. And you know, there's something to being able to see more starkly the ways in which even an [00:50:00] idealized space such as a university is actually deeply enmeshed with capitalism. And all of the terrible things that go with it is also an opportunity, you know, to find new spaces for our work.

[00:50:15] **Aly:** I really like the "what is happening has always been happening." I've been thinking about joy, I think, in a couple of different ways. Like, I am about to take over as Director of Graduate Studies, and this is something that I've wanted: an administrative role in shepherding the Disability Studies program. And also, it's an institutional leadership role at a time when you are showing an attachment to a system that is deeply problematic and deeply harmful, but also trying to understand why. There are parts of the job that are actually joyful when we strip away all of the [00:51:00] harms that happen in the university, and all of the pressures to turn it into a business, and all the ways that it already has become a business that is just extractive of graduate student labor, adjunct labor, undergraduate student loan/financial aid to feed a much bigger beast. But then, all of that sort of strips away in moments with students where they are hopeful and they are joyful and they are taking ideas that you present to them, and they are running with them in new ways.

[00:51:32] **Aly:** And so I think a lot about [how] the job now feels just a little bit more like holding the walls so students can experience the joy—holding the walls of the pressure that they're under, and the world that is sort of pushing down on them to operationalize their education into skills and careers. And I don't know… that to me feels like the most urgent task in all of the thing that's happening in university [00:52:00] spaces right now. And that's the piece that I'm excited about. I also don't want to say joy only happens in our jobs—that's a problematic sort of thing. But I don't think—like, there's a reason we all went into this kind of work: that thinking is joyful, and seeing students think is joyful. And so, finding ways to sort of protect that, and let that help us build the kind of future that we can't maybe see because we're all so tired and beat down from being in the institutional space along. I don't know.

[00:52:37] **Theodora:** I think that is really beautiful, and I think we all relate to this infusion of joy that we get from our students.

[00:52:45] **Alyson:** I totally agree with you, and I really appreciate you saying that, Aly, because it is! It's awesome to be with students right now who are excited about things still, who are learning and who are pissed [00:53:00] and who are like: I cannot believe this carceral bullshit; I want to abolish the State and capitalism and ableism and white supremacy. I mean, it's so beautiful. And so, yeah. I don't think we have to be "Rah! Rah! Institutions" to love supporting and working with students. But there are other spaces too, right? I'm not in the classroom at the moment, and just finding spaces where you can support folks as they develop knowledge, and where they can help you develop knowledge, and where you can share experiences and cripistemologically hang out and develop cripistemologies together I think is really cool and really special and joyful and pleasurable right now.

[00:53:49] **Theodora:** Thank you so much to all of you for making the time for this conversation. And reflecting and creatively thinking [00:54:00] together, and

for all of your wonderful selves in individual and shared spaces.

[00:54:14] **Delores:** Thank you again, Theodora, Jess, Aly, and Alyson, for this engaging discussion of crip silences, crip futurities, and crip joy. We'd also like to thank the entire *Positions* editorial and production team, along with our co-producers, whose work makes these episodes possible. And we also thank you, our audience, for your time and attention today. If you haven't already, please make sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to your podcast, and join us for the next episode of *Positions: The Podcast of the Cultural Studies Association*, where we'll tackle other essential and engaging topics.

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Notes

1. This title is an homage and reference to Ellen Samuels, "Six Ways of Looking at Crip Time." *Disability Studies Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (2017): https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824. < https://doi.org/10.18061/dsq.v37i3.5824> ↩

2. Theodora Danylevich and Alyson Patsavas, eds., “Cripistemologies of Crisis: Emergent Knowledges for the Present,” *Lateral* 10, no. 1 (2021): https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis. < https://csalateral.org/archive/section/cripistemologies-of-crisis/>

3. Barbara Smith, Cherríe Moraga, and other women of color feminist uplifted the kitchen table as a site of radical feminist knowledge production.

4. I want to thank my friends Denise Pike and Maya Larson for taking notes as I verbally processed this essay and for helping me put the commas where they were missing.

5. Giorgio Agamben,*State of Exception* (University of Chicago Press, 2005).

6. I’m currently reading a riveting book on the history of the Oxford English Dictionary. Spoiler alert: there is a fascinating mad, neurodivergent, and disabled presence in this archive. Sarah Ogilvie, *The Dictionary People: The Unsung Heroes Who Created the Oxford English Dictionary* (Vintage, 2024).

7. Etymonline, s.v. “Crisis – Etymology, Origin & Meaning,” https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis < https://www.etymonline.com/word/crisis> .

8. Merriam Webster Online, s.v. “Definition of CRISIS,” https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis. < https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/crisis>

9. I use the term “bodymind” following many of my mentors in disability studies and disability communities who refuse the pervasiveness of the Cartesian split and use the term to signify the inextricability of cognitive processes from those of the material body. See Margaret Price, “The Bodymind Program and the Possibilities of Pain,” *Hypatia* 30, no. 1 (2015): 268–84, https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127 < https://doi.org/10.1111/hypa.12127> .

10. This sentence has stuck with me for nearly twenty years since I heard it in an episode of *Queer as Folk*. Kelly Makin, “Big Fucking Mouth,” *Queer as Folk*, season 3, episode 9, Showtime, 2003.

11. *White Supremacy Culture*, https://www.whitesupremacyculture.info/.

12. Ibid.

13. I am referencing a quote by disability activist and author Neil Marcus, “Disability is not a brave struggle or ‘courage in the face of adversity.’ Disability is an art. It’s an ingenious way to live.” Neil Marcus, Rod Lathim, Roger Marcus, and Access Theater, *Storm Reading* (play), Kennedy Center, 1992.

14. Interdependence is the seventh principle of disability justice. Patricia Berne, Aurora Levins Morales, David Langstaff, and Sins Invalid, “Ten Principles of Disability Justice,” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 46, nos. 1–2 (2018): 227–30, https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2018.0003. < https://doi.org/10.1353/wsq.2018.0003>

15. Allison Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip* (Indiana University Press, 2013). ↩

16. I am borrowing this term from Margaret Price, *Crip Spacetime: Access, Failure, and Accountability in Academic Life* (Duke University Press, 2024). ↩

17. Collective liberation is the tenth principle of disability justice. Berne and Levins Morales et al., "Ten Principles of Disability Justice." ↩

Author Information

Delores B. Phillips

Delores B. Phillips is Director of the African, African American, and Diaspora (AAAD) Studies Center and Associate Professor of English at James Madison University. She specializes in postcolonial literature and theory with a focus on food and waste studies and digital cultures. Her publications appear in *Cultural Critique*, *Narrative Cultures*, the *Routledge Handbook of African Literature*, *Postcolonial Studies*, *Food and Feminism*, and other venues.

View all of Delores B. Phillips's articles.

Alyson Patsavas

Alyson Patsavas is Associate Professor in the Department of Disability and Human Development at University of Illinois Chicago. Her scholarship is situated at the intersections of disability studies, queer theory, and feminist theory and focuses on cultural discourses of pain, chronic illness, trauma, and disability. Her book, *Pain in Relation: Causality, Chronicity, and Crip Evidence*, won the 2023 Tobin Siebers Prize for Disability Studies in the Humanities and is forthcoming from the University of Michigan Press. Patsavas is a writer and producer on the documentary film *Code of the Freaks* (2020). She coedited "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry," a twenty-four-piece collection of essays, creative work, and praxis projects found in *Lateral*. Her work has also appeared in the *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, *Disability Studies Quarterly*, *Crip Magazine*, *Feminist Wire*, and the *Czech Sociological Review*.

View all of Alyson Patsavas's articles.

Theodora Danylevich

Theodora Danylevich teaches in Disability Studies, Women's & Gender Studies, Writing, and the Medical Humanities at Georgetown University. Her research focuses on feminist and disability critical methodologies and liberatory aesthetics. Her current book project conceptualizes "[sic]k tactics" as resistant engagements with confining social scripts, and illustrates the framework across a range of examples in literary, aesthetic, pedagogical, and organizational contexts. She is the co-curator of "Crip Pandemic Life: A Tapestry," and her scholarly writing has appeared in *Lateral*, *Rhizomes*, *Journal of Bioethical Inquiry*, *Journal of Integrative and Innovative Humanities*, *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies*, and *PEITHO*.

View all of Theodora Danylevich's articles.

Alyson K. Spurgas

Alyson K. Spurgas is Associate Professor of Sociology and affiliated faculty in the Women's, Gender, & Sexuality Studies Program at Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut. Alyson researches, writes, and teaches about the sociology of trauma, the politics of desire, and technologies of care. They are the author of *Diagnosing Desire: Biopolitics and Femininity into the Twenty-First Century* (The Ohio State University Press, 2020) and co-author of *Decolonize Self-Care* (O/R Books, 2023) among other articles and essays which can be found at alysonkspurgas.com.

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Jess Whatcott

Jess Whatcott studies and teaches critical disability studies and critical carceral studies in the US-Mexico borderlands, occupied Kumeyaay territory. They are Associate Professor of Women's, Gender, and Sexuality studies at San Diego State University. Whatcott

is the author of *Menace to the Future: A Disability and Queer History of Carceral Eugenics* (2024).

View all of Jess Whatcott's articles.

Angela Carter

Angela M. Carter is an independent scholar, educator, and community organizer. As a Ronald E. McNair scholar, Angela became a first-generation college graduate in 2009 when she earned her BA in English from Truman State University. Dr. Carter completed her PhD.in Feminist Studies at the University of Minnesota in 2019, where she co-founded the Critical Disability Studies Collective, an academic organization advancing intersectional and critical inquiries around disability, ableism, and access. She has worked in various capacities over the last twenty years teaching, researching, and advocating around experiences of injustice and inequity in higher education. Currently, she is connecting with other disabled Minnesotans to form a grassroots community organization, AmplifyMN: A Disability Justice Collective.

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Article details

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